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ABSTRACT

Noting that whole language is fast becoming a driving philosophy behind curriculum development, this paper discusses the whole language approach as used in public school systems, adult basic education (ABE), and English as a Second Language (ESL). The paper begins with a short summary of socio-psycholinguistics (the theory upon which whole language philosophy is based) and then briefly addresses the influence John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and Lev Vygotsky have had upon whole language. The paper also offers some definitions of whole language from several educators. Following these definitions, the paper describes several principles of whole language philosophy (language is whole, written language is language, emphasis on meaning, and language is social), including examples from the classroom. The paper next discusses implications of whole language philosophy for the adult learner in ABE and ESL settings--whole language takes advantage of the wealth of experiences adult learners bring to the classroom; whole language in the classroom seems more "adult" than traditional methods of learning sight words or phonics; and a whole language approach uses authentic material, which is more interesting to adult learners than worksheets or basal readers. The paper concludes with a discussion of several concerns about whole language. Contains 20 references. A 37-item bibliography of books and journal articles (published between 1971 and 1994) organized alphabetically under various themes is attached. (RS)

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Whole Language:

A Philosophy of Literacy Teaching for Adults, Too!

by

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Whole Language for Adults

September 12, 1994

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Whole Language:

A Philosophy of Literacy Teaching for Adults, Too!

The topic of whole language has swept the country. The annual educational meetings and conferences of organizations from the International Reading Association to Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) inevitably include presentations on the topic of whole language. This can partly be explained by educators infatuation with novelty, and whole language is a fairly new phenomena. Another reason for whole language's seemingly new popularity is that teachers and administrators are worried about the public's claim that schools are not effective, so, they are turning to something different. At any rate, whole language has become a part of the educational scene, not only in our public school system, but in the fields of Adult Basic Education (ABE) and English as a Second Language (ESL) as well. It is fast becoming a driving philosophy behind curriculum development. However, how do educators define whole language?

Like any trendy term, whole language is difficult to understand because its meaning varies from educator to educator. Whole language is not a method of instruction, nor is it an academic program or event. There are not whole language textbooks, worksheets, or packaged products. Rather, whole language is an entire philosophy of learning and interacting with language. The main premise of this philosophy concerns the way language is thought to be learned: language is learned as a cohesive organization of systems working together as a whole (Edelsky, Altwerger, & Flores, 1991). Thus, the term *whole language*.

In this paper, I will begin with a short summary of socio-psycholinguistics, the theory upon

which whole language philosophy is based, and briefly address the influence John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and Lev Vygotsky have had upon whole language. I will then give some definitions of whole language from several educators. Following these definitions, I will name and describe several principles of whole language philosophy, including examples from the classroom. Next, because I am interested in the fields of ESL and ABE, I will name the implications of whole language for the adult learner. I will conclude my paper with naming several concerns about whole language that I found.

SOCIO-PSYCHOLINGUISTIC THEORY

Whole language philosophy has its foundation in socio-psycholinguistic theory. In short, the following are three major principles of socio-psycholinguistic theory:

- Making meaning is more significant than identifying words. In fact, accurate identification of all the words is not usually essential for getting the meaning (Weaver, 1980). Frank Smith (1985) writes in his book, Reading without nonsense, "...as we become fluent readers we learn to rely more on what we already know, on what is behind the eyeballs, and less on the print on the page in front of us" (p. 9).
- Language is naturally integrative. It "is a supersystem composed of interdependent, inseparable subsystems" (Edelsky, Altwerger, & Flores, 1991, p. 11). It is learned and ought to be taught with all of its subsystems intact. These subsystems--semantics, syntax, and graphophonemics (phonics)--are preserved and supported by pragmatics (the connections between aspects of context and all aspects of language, such as word order, pronunciation, etc.) and should not be taken apart if language is to be learned naturally (Watson, 1989).

- Reading is an active process, a process in which a reader is deliberately looking for meaning (Smith, 1985; Weaver, 1980). Frank Smith (1985) writes,

> ...meaning is not something that a reader or listener *gets from* language, but something that is brought to language. The difference is important, for it demonstrates that reading is not a passive activity but involves complex intellectual processes that must always be actively initiated by the reader. (p. 10)

DEWEY, PIAGET, AND VYGOTSKY

John Dewey is one of those names that most educators have heard. He is a philosopher that is part of the twentieth century and his ideas have greatly influenced education, particularly whole language philosophy. John Dewey was part of the Progressive Education era which lasted from the late 1800s to the early 1930s. Dewey's ideas have provided whole language philosophy with a theoretical basis for understanding the strength of reflective teaching, teachers collaborating with learners in curriculum development, and the integration of language with all other subjects in the curriculum (Goodman, Y., 1989). He envisioned classrooms to look like laboratories, places where students could experiment and learn about their interests. It was necessary for teachers to build on students' interests using learning activities. These learning activities were most important; textbooks and teacher lectures were secondary (Edelsky, Altwerger, & Flores, 1991).

Jean Piaget has also influenced whole language philosophy. One question with great significance for education that Piaget explored was how people come to know concepts, moralities, and ideas (Goodman, Y., 1989). Through his research, he showed how children are active participants in their own learning (Edelsky, Altwerger, & Flores, 1991), which has influenced whole language philosophy. With Piaget, whole language teachers realize that children do not wait until they are told to learn. Rather, they learn about the world through

their own activities and develop their own versions of the world.

Whole language educators have also been influenced by a Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky. He explored the relation between the learning of the individual learner and the influences of the social context. He developed an idea that students can transcend their own individual limitations through collaborations with others (Edelsky, Altwerger, & Flores, 1991). Thus, interactions between teacher and student, as well as between student and student are important to an individual's learning. Yetta Goodman (1989) writes:

> Vygotsky's zone of proximal development emphasizes the important role teachers play in students' learning, even though learners are ultimately responsible for their own conceptual development. The student does not learn in isolation but is supported, and, unfortunately, sometimes thwarted, in language and thinking development by others in the school environment. (p. 117)

Whole language teachers play an important role. They must accept responsibility for encouraging growth in their students, but they must also be given the power and authority to organize, plan, and choose appropriate resources (Goodman, K., 1989).

In closing, the ideas of great thinkers such as Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotsky have influenced whole language philosophy. Although whole language might be seen as a recent fad in education today, it has deep foundations that have been enriched by the ideas of many. Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotsky are only three of those many. The movement continues to be influenced by the writings of Yetta and Ken Goodman, Pat Rigg, Dorothy Watson, and others.

DEFINITIONS OF WHOLE LANGUAGE

As stated above, many people have influenced the whole language movement. The term was first used by Jerome Harste and Carolyn Burke (1971) to describe a theoretical view of the reading process. Since 1971 educators have been writing about whole language, and definitions

abound. Here are several:

> Whole language is a framework that includes both an explicit theoretical base (about language and language acquisition) and pedagogical implications. It takes key characteristics of the way language is learned (e.g., that it's learned through real use with others, that hypothesis construction is a major part of the process, that meanings of social relations are acquired along with the language that accompanies those relations) as a "best model" for all learning in school, not just language learning. In other words, whole language is an umbrella--primarily an umbrella *theory-in-practice*. (Edelsky, Altwerger, & Flores, 1991, p. 72)

> Whole language is clearly a lot of things to a lot of people; it's not a dogma to be narrowly practiced. It's a way of bringing together a view of language, a view of learning, and a view of people, in particular two special groups of people: kids and teachers. (Goodman, 1986, p. 5)

> Whole language is a perspective on education that is supported by beliefs about learners and learning, teachers and teaching, language, and curriculum. (Watson, 1989, p. 133)

> ...those who advocate a whole language approach emphasize the importance of approaching reading and writing by building upon the language and experiences of the child. (Weaver, 1988, p. 44)

> Whole language is simply what its name implies: language which is whole, language which is complete. It is not phonics drills, vocabulary tests, comprehension exercises, or spelling lists. It is not a hierarchy of skills and subskills that can be checked off on a chart. It is a realization that human beings possess a need to communicate, and the understanding that literacy helps to fulfill this need. (Gillin, 1991, p. 7)

Whole language is a philosophy of literacy instruction based on the concept that learners need to experience language as an integrated whole. Since whole language is not just a method of teaching, but rather a philosophy of learning, it is impossible to simply describe what a whole language classroom looks like without first looking at the basic principles of this philosophy. A classroom becomes whole language-like when the teacher has beliefs in the principles of whole language and teaches accordingly.

PRINCIPLES OF WHOLE LANGUAGE

Although the definitions above vary, whole language has several fundamental principles: **1** Language is whole (Franklin & Rigg, 1994; Gillin, 1991; Watson, 1989); **2** Written language is language, so what is true for language is also true for written language (Edelsky, Altwerger, & Flores, 1991); **3** The major purposes of language are the creation and communication of meaning (Edelsky, Altwerger, & Flores, 1991); and **4** Language is social and should promote social interaction (Edelsky, Altwerger, & Flores, 1991; Franklin & Rigg, 1994; Newman, 1985).

Language is whole

In natural situations language is whole, and thus should remain whole in the classroom. However, in many formal learning situations teachers break language down into parts and teach the smaller parts to the learners. We believe that if we break something down into manageable parts, it will be easier to understand. This idea has dominated our thought in the Western world since the philosopher Descartes compared the world to a clock, a mechanism that could be understood by breaking it down piece by piece and then putting it back together from smaller pieces to larger ones. Unfortunately, with language the sum of the parts does not add up to an integrated whole. It is better to begin with the whole before looking at the parts individually. If we look at language as a whole, we will most likely have a greater respect for and understanding of it.

This principle that language is whole and should be taught as such is based on a socio-psycholinguistic view of reading (Weaver, 1989). According to a socio-psycholinguistic model, reading proceeds from whole to part. In a traditional approach, lessons often follow a pattern

of first teaching the letters, then words, and then stringing words into sentences, and finally putting sentences together to create stories. Whole language reverses these steps by respecting the wholeness of language. First learners begin with listening to stories and learning to understand and appreciate them, and then they move on to the smaller parts, such as letter competence.

I think about when I was growing up and all the stories I heard from my parents and grandparents. I was fortunate because I was surrounded by avid readers and lovers of children's literature. Even as a baby, my mother read aloud to me and let me hold books. I spent the first four years of my life listening to stories read aloud to me. Sometimes I followed the words along in a book. I also heard stories read on record albums. I still have a vivid memory of listening to the story, "Hansel and Gretel" while staring at the picture of the gingerbread house on the album cover. I learned an appreciation for literature long before I could read. When I finally began learning my letters a love of reading was already instilled in me.

Whole language teachers take advantage of working from whole to part by teaching that way. They begin with whole, authentic texts and read them aloud to students, or let students read aloud to one another. When I did my practice teaching in 1983, I read aloud everyday to my 6th graders. I did not choose random inspirational quotes to read to them. I chose a storybook, one that I had recently been given, and read them the entire book in a few sittings. The book was The Velveteen Rabbit, and the students remained interested in the story till the very end. They looked forward to the following day when I would read the next chapter. Afterwards, when I asked them what story they wanted to read next, they asked for another book with animals in it. I did not know about whole language then, but it made sense to me to read

an entire story to the students because it is easier to develop an appreciation for something if you can see the whole picture, rather than fragmented parts.

Written language is language

Those who advocate a whole language viewpoint expect learners to learn to read and write as they learned to speak--naturally, gradually, with a minimum of direct instruction, and with a lot of support rather than the hindrance of constant corrections (Weaver, 1988). This does not mean that learners are set loose in classrooms to fend for themselves. That is not the way parents treat their children when they are learning to talk. Think about when a baby first begins babbling. In our culture, parents, older siblings, and relatives encourage a baby to babble by imitating the sounds the baby is making, or by making other sounds for the baby to imitate. The baby is beginning to learn language, although they are not aware, nor taught, the subsystems of it. The baby hears language being used in context, and eventually learns to use language in context.

When a child first learns to speak, he or she does not speak "correctly." Often a child will call her or his brother "bubba," or say "wa-wa," for water. Does the brother insist he be called "brother" before he will pay attention to his sibling? Does the mother demand that the child pronounce "water" clearly and accurately before she gives a cup of water? Usually not, but the brother may model his title for his sibling, or the mother might say, "Here's some water for you," while giving it to her child. Eventually the child will learn to say "brother" and "water" without having to complete any worksheets or take any tests.

Just as babies learn to talk by talking, students learn to read and write by actually reading and writing (Edelsky, Altwerger, & Flores, 1991). The teacher provides a learning environment

rich in the written word for the students to explore. This is important especially for adults who have experienced frustration and failure in learning to read and write. Most were probably taught unsuccessfully by traditional approaches. Returning to a classroom void of the pleasures and excitement of the written word could be an incredible obstacle. The teacher can easily provide these students with an environment that is full of opportunities to read and write, and use adult learners' abilities to communicate orally as a starting point for learning (Gillin, 1991).

A classroom full of joy and enthusiasm for the written word, both for children and adults, would be full of reading material that is of interest, as well as challenging, to the learners. The walls would be covered with words and stories students have written. The teacher provides students with opportunities to talk about their interests before and after reading. The teacher also sets aside time each class period to allow the students to read silently. The teacher realizes it is important to allow the students to choose the materials they want to read. Students form interest groups (as opposed to leveled groups) and read literature that is related to their preferred topic. These interest groups explore themes together through the written word, as well as through discussion and experiential activities. The reading material is not only fiction, but nonfiction as well.

Another feature of this tenet is that reading, writing, listening, and speaking are not thought of as separate components of the curriculum, skills to be taught in isolation from one another. These four language modes support one another and should not be separated artificially. They should be combined in instruction, because spoken language supports reading and writing; reading exhibits a variety of styles, designs, and conventions; and writing helps us understand how writers put texts together, which in turn helps us read with greater ease.

One of the saddest features of our schools today is the separation of subjects, as well as skills in the subject areas. There is a time for spelling, which is isolated from writing time, which is separated from reading, which is set apart from storytime. The result, I believe, unfortunately, is that children learn to dread their lessons. They come to develop anxiety about math or language or writing because of the difficulty in finding meaning in the disconnectedness. John Gatto (1992) compares his daily teaching to television programming, "I teach the un-relating of everything, an infinite fragmentation the opposite of cohesion" (p. 4). He writes that the result of this is confusion.

A whole language ESL classroom, for example, would integrate the four traditional skill areas of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. In many ESL programs, these four skills are typically taught separately. Why not put them all together to create a setting where reading about a topic of interest supports having a discussion about the same topic, which requires both listening and speaking? Later, if students want to debate the topic, they can begin by writing out their arguments and sharing them with their team before debating it with the opposing team. Then the four skills support one another naturally, rather than being artificially separated.

Emphasis on meaning

We use language, oral and written, to convey messages, or meanings. Thus, it should be used purposely and genuinely in the classroom. Students should be encouraged to use language to communicate with one another, with the teacher, and with others. Not only do students communicate through writing and conversation, they also engage in real experiences and read authentic texts. Schools should be places where students do history as historians do, write as writers do, and do science as scientists do (Edelsky, Altwerger, & Flores, 1991). The teacher

does not need to find worksheets and other exercises for students to practice or drill concepts.

Frank Smith (1985) says that something is meaningful if the learner can bring meaning to it. Learners need to see a purpose in their activities, and it must be their purpose, not the teacher's. He writes:

> The primary concern of teachers must be to ensure that all children are admitted into the literacy club, where they can see written language employed in a variety of useful and meaningful ways and can receive assistance in employing written language themselves. Accuracy and "skills" should not be stressed at the expense of meaningfulness to the child; they are a consequence rather than a prerequisite of reading experience. Teachers must protect themselves from effects of programs and tests, which can persuade children that reading is nonsensical, painful, and pointless. (p. 153)

Students must see sense in the work that they do. If the teacher takes into consideration the students' interests and creates real tasks for them to participate in, the learning that takes place emphasizes meaning, and the necessary skills for completing the task can be developed on the way.

In the classroom, emphasis should be placed on meaning:

> Stopping students at the point at which they are producing meaning (through either oral or written language) in order to make surface-level corrections may result in stopping students in their linguistic and cognitive tracks. (Watson, 1989, p. 137)

When attention is taken away from the composing process, the meaning the student is trying to convey can falter and the student may lose her or his momentum and struggle to get it back. This is especially important in ESL classroom settings. ESL learners need an environment that feels safe so that the students can practice and play around with the new language they are learning without the fear of being stopped and corrected. However, there is a big difference between allowing a student to continue if the meaning is understood and letting the student ramble on without communicating her or his ideas. When the meaning is emphasized, the reader

or listener will stop the speaker and ask for clarification, or ask the writer what she or he meant by what was written. Also, attention to standard forms of English are part of a whole language programs, but not over meaning (Watson, 1989).

When I look back at my experiences in elementary and high school, I remember the importance of the red pen. The red pen was used to point all my mistakes--grammar, spelling, punctuation, wrong answers--and never used to point out what the teacher learned from my work. My teachers did not emphasize to me that meaning was important. Instead, I learned to fear making mistakes because that meant the teacher would mark up my work with the red pen. It was only in college that my professors looked at the meaning of my work over the grammar, spelling, etc. Of course a paper with incorrect spelling and grammar errors is not acceptable at the college level, but I was turning in papers with correct spelling and grammar that were poorly organized and did not get across my ideas very well.

What I learned from my experience is that meaning should take precedence over accuracy. By acknowledging someone's work as meaningful, the author of that work is validated and feels positive about the experience rather than negative. A whole language advocate would not say that it is not necessary to work on standard forms. Rather, he or she would say that meaning comes first before being completely correct.

Language is social

Language and language learning are social activities and they transpire in situations that encourage conversation and the sharing of ideas (Newman, 1985). Learners in whole language classrooms socialize with one another just as they do in the world outside the classroom. "[L]earners talk with each other about what they are reading, the problems they are solving or

not solving, and the experiments they are conducting" (Watson, 1989, p. 135). Whole language advocates emphasize the social purposes of language rather than the language itself (Edelsky, Altwerger, & Flores, 1991). They emphasize the natural use of language in class, and not contrived situations.

There is a spirit of cooperation in the whole language classroom. This is where whole language is specifically influenced by Lev Vygotsky and John Dewey's ideas. Dewey saw teachers collaborating with learners in curriculum development (Goodman, Y., 1989). Harste (1989) writes about this idea of collaboration as well, "Community and connectedness become the hallmarks of learning, and teaching is not so much transmission as collaboration. Curriculum is negotiated by teachers and students and begins in life experiences of the language learner" (p. 247). Whole language advocates learners working together with the teacher to create their own curriculum.

There are many ways a whole language teacher can negotiate the curriculum with the learners before planning instruction. In negotiating the curriculum the teacher gets to know the students and discover their goals. The negotiation process is either informal or formal, depending on the teacher's style. Negotiating the curriculum works quite well when done as a group activity. This way the learners can learn about one another as the teacher learns about them all. The class can decide upon a theme to pursue for any length of time they desire, perhaps a term or even just a week. The learners will also probably be interested in pursuing their own individual interests. The teacher and students working together come up with a schedule that allows for group work as well as individual work.

To set up a collaborative atmosphere in the whole language classroom, the teacher begins

where the students are, teaches from the students' points of view, provides authentic practice, and helps students reflect on their thinking and learning processes (Cheatham, J., Clarke, M., McKay, D., Schneider, M., & Siedow, M. D., 1994). To start where the students are means to incorporate their experiences into the classroom. A whole language teacher does not ignore the wealth of experiences the learners bring with them. One way to teach from the students' points of view is to use real examples from their lives rather than relying on examples from texts or other outside sources. By providing real practice, students apply new skills in ways they want to use them. The whole language teacher encourages students to write *real* letters to *real* people rather than practice writing letters to nobody in particular and that serve no practical purpose. Lastly, the whole language teacher realizes the importance of helping students think about *how* they learn. This metacognition process assists students in developing strategies to deal with the problems they identify.

Some concluding thoughts

Whole language is a philosophy based on the idea that students learn when they have authentic experiences with language as an integrated whole. The classroom stretches out into the real world and allows students to express their ideas and conduct experiments to see what works and what does not. Whole language educators want their students, through their genuine experiences in the classroom, to be life long learners. They want to enhance the natural learning process in students, rather than interfere with it. When students feel that their own learning is important to someone else, they are encouraged to keep learning.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ADULT LEARNER

Whole language philosophy is typically thought to guide only elementary school and first language teaching practice. However, the principles of whole language have implications for the adult learner in ABE and ESL settings also. First, whole language philosophy takes advantage of the wealth of experiences adult learners bring to the classroom. Second, whole language as it plays out in the classroom seems more "adult" to the learners than traditional methods of learning sight words or phonics. Last, a whole language approach uses authentic material, which is more interesting to adult learners than worksheets or basal readers.

Adult learners' wealth of experiences

A whole language approach is based on socio-psycholinguistic theory, which claims that reading is an active process, one in which a reader is deliberately looking for meaning (Smith, 1985; Weaver, 1980). Thus, meaning is not something that a reader gets from the language; rather, the reader brings meaning to the language (Smith, 1985). Adult learners bring with them many life experiences upon which to draw meaning. Gillin (1991) writes, "[Whole language] focuses upon students [sic] strengths, not weaknesses, and uses their own individual experiences as a vehicle to move toward language competence" (p. 7).

Take for example the case study of Norman (Meyer, V., Estes, S. L., Harris, V. K., & Daniels, D. M., 1991). At 44 Norman decided that he wanted to learn to read and write, so he enrolled in an ABE class. When Norman started attending classes, his self-esteem was very low, and his teacher felt that building up Norman's self-confidence was her biggest challenge. She invited Norman to take magazines in the class, go through them, and cut out advertisements for products he knew. Norman and his teacher spent the evening cutting and pasting the ads to

blank paper. Later, Norman "read" the names of the products. His teacher was building on Norman's experiences with environmental print *outside* the classroom to help him increase his reading vocabulary. Creating a book of environmental print increased Norman's self-esteem by helping him realize that his past experiences included some reading.

The whole language approach allows adult learners to use their strengths and recognize their weaknesses because the process relies on using the written word to give voice to the learners' individual ideas (Stasz, B. B., Schwartz, R. G., & Weeden, J. C., 1991). A method which gives voice to individual ideas is the language experience approach (For more information about this method, see Kennedy, K., & Roeder, S., 1975.), which is quite popular with new adult readers and writers. Basically, in the language experience approach, a new reader tells stories to an experienced reader who transcribes the stories verbatim. These stories then become the reading material for the new reader. Norman's teachers used the language experience approach with him (Meyer, V., Estes, S. L., Harris, V. K., & Daniels, D. M., 1991). It was also used with a group of mothers in a Head Start program in Geneva, New York (Stasz, B. B., Schwartz, R. G., & Weeden, J. C., 1991). The tutors in this program combined the use of the language experience approach with oral history.

Basically, in the Geneva project, tutors established good rapport with the learners and encouraged the women to share stories about themselves. The tutors carefully recorded the stories the women told, asking for more information or clarification when necessary. The outcome of the language experience approach in the Geneva project was the publication of four books by the group of mothers. The books were featured in the local newspaper and displayed by the public library. The books are also available to other new readers. The content of the

books range from family histories and recipes to a children's play. Whole language advocates encourage the use of the language experience approach with adult new readers and writers.

An "adult" way to learn

In the whole language classroom, teachers and students actively learn and plan the curriculum together (Gillin, 1991). Consequently, the atmosphere of the class is similar to that of a craft workshop or artist studio (Stasz, B. B., Schwartz, R. G., & Weeden, J. C., 1991). I believe adults are attracted to these classrooms because they are more familiar to them than the setup of a traditional classroom. Numerous ABE and ESL learners have been out of the traditional school setting for a long time, and perhaps even had bad experiences in those settings. They may relate traditional classrooms to the way children learn best. Many adults have been out in the workforce for a number of years and have learned how to do their jobs by actually doing them. A workshop-type atmosphere, which exists in whole language classrooms, is a more attractive one to the adult learner because it is does not treat the adult learner as a child.

One of the principles of whole language says that the major purposes of language are the creation and communication of meaning (Edelsky, Altwerger, & Flores, 1991). This meaning-centered approach fits more closely the experiences, needs, and abilities of adult learners than do the decontextualized skills activities found in many adult literacy programs (Keefe, D., & Meyer, V., 1991). The isolation of the components of language and sequential learning may seem logical to many teachers, but adults are impatient to use their language skills to make meaning in real-life situations. Children may be content to learn something because the teacher says so. However, adults need to see the usefulness of what their are learning. They want to take what they learn and apply it to their everyday life.

The response to an adult's writing and reading should focus on what she or he is trying to communicate. Adult educators need to instruct writers and readers the skills of writing and reading in the context of their own endeavors to write and read (Keefe, D., & Meyer, V., 1991). One activity that allows adult learners to read and write meaningfully is the use of journals and dialogue journals. Every class period the teacher gives time to the students to write in a journal, allowing them to write about anything they want to write about. Dialogue journals are also an option. A dialogue journal is one in which a dialogue takes place between the student and the teacher. After the students have written in the journal, the teacher collects them and writes a response to each individual student. When writing the response, the teacher pays attention to the ideas the student is conveying, not the accuracy of the writing. Hence, the teacher does not make any corrections in the journals. It is true that dialoguing with individual students through journals is time-consuming, but it is time well spent. The relationship between student and teacher is enhanced through the journal writing: the teacher is able to learn about her or his students in a different way and the students have the opportunity to use their writing skills authentically while getting to know their teacher.

Allowing adult students to work on meaningful tasks is liberating as well. Pat Rigg (1991) writes about Gary Pharness's workplace literacy programs in Vancouver, B. C.:

> Pharness uses writing rather than reading as the basis for literacy because he believes it is vital for adults to write their own stories and then to discuss these with peers. Through the writing and the discussion, the authors receive both an acceptance of their own histories and a chance to learn how their stories are perceived by others. This has the same advantage as a dialogue between friends: Ideas can be articulated and examined. The writers not only become more literate but they also become more confident about themselves as people, not just as workers. (p. 535)

This kind of experience empowers adult learners. They leave the classroom with the skills they

have learned and can apply them in their lives. They can make positive changes as they gain confidence.

Authentic materials interesting to adults

To nurture new adult readers, whole language instructors provide materials that are completely authentic and that depict the types of texts learners are likely to come across in their lives (Hedgecock, J., & Pucci, S.). Authentic materials are much more interesting to adult learners, as well as much more likely to engage them. All types of written and spoken texts are used in a successful literacy program.

Using authentic material makes real-life demands on adult learners. ABE and ESL students know the frustration of being unable to interpret the written or spoken word outside the classroom. The whole language teacher helps students by bringing into the classroom written and spoken texts found outside the classroom. Students practice reading real bus schedules, real recipes, and real books. Whole language advocates are not satisfied with allowing students to practice drills out of workbooks, or reading aloud from basal textbooks. These activities are not practical for adult learners. Where outside the classroom will a student encounter a worksheet? Perhaps worksheets would be encountered in another ABE setting, but would not likely be found in the outside world. In a college ESL classroom, for example, a teacher could bring in cassettes of authentic lectures for the students to listen to as they prepare to enter the world of academia. The students can listen to the cassettes and work on their note-taking skills, which is a reality in college classrooms.

Whole language teachers know that it is not a good idea to shelter their adult learners from the real world. Their students must operate there, so the use of authentic materials is much

more helpful to them than the use of sight-word lists or grammar worksheets. I think about my ESL students and their struggles to find work and to get around in their new environment. When I took the time to ask them what they wanted to learn, they told me that they needed to learn how to look for work in the United States, how to ride the busses, and other practical activities. They frequently brought in actual forms they needed to fill out and genuine examples of job interviews. These are the materials I used in my classroom, rather than always pulling out random exercises from basic skills workbooks. We worked with bus schedules and weather maps together. The students left the classroom equipped to face riding the bus and understanding the weather maps in newspapers and news reports. Not only were my students able to apply what they learned in class to their everyday lives, they also kept coming back to learn more. I found that an added benefit of using materials that the students encountered outside the classroom was increased student retention.

Some concluding thoughts about using whole language with adults

It should be noted that the phrase *whole language* is not often used for adult learners. Some educators use the term *participatory* instead (Rigg, 1991). Whatever term is used, however, because whole language keeps language whole and focuses on creating meaning from all forms of language, adults are able to recognize themselves as readers and writers from the beginning of the literacy process. Whole language approaches confirm for adults that they can read and write meaningfully and at the same time the mystery of the reading process is taken away. Thus, adult learners are empowered as they enter "the literacy club" (Smith, 1985, p. 153).

CONCERNS

As an educator I am attracted to whole language philosophy. I have never liked scientifically managed instruction, and whole language feels more liberating. I am drawn to a philosophy that promotes a classroom of students interacting with real texts and doing real-life activities. Classrooms full of students sitting in rows, all using the same worksheet and individually drawing circles around the words that have the "same sound as the a in cat" no longer seem to promote learning. A steady diet of phonics and sight-word worksheets removes reading from the act of communication. Most learners do not see the point of the worksheets. However, nearly everyone likes stories. Whole language takes advantage of this by bringing whole stories into the classroom.

On the whole, I am willing to embrace whole language philosophy, but not without mentioning some of my own personal concerns. I do not have many concerns because whole language seems to offer educators a much more positive way of thinking about teaching and learning. However, there are a couple of shortcomings in my eyes. First of all, I take very seriously Delpit's (1988) argument that liberal, process-oriented programs such as whole language may unintentionally exclude poor and minority students from "the culture of power" (p. 280). Whole language seeks to honor the natural language of the oppressed and reject the skills and trappings of official school language. By doing this, whole language programs guarantee that affluent whites will always have greater access to the power code. Delpit argues that since affluent whites have grown up with the codes of power, they fare better in process-oriented classrooms that emphasize the natural language of the learners.

Delpit does not argue for a skills-only approach to teaching. However, she does emphasize

that as long the power code exists, teachers have an obligation to their students to help them learn to read and write in that code. She advocates a curriculum in which students become literate in both codes. Her argument does not completely reject whole language philosophy, but it should warn its advocates to examine the realities and complexities of the real world. The cost of denying learners understanding of the power codes may be quite devastating.

Whole language advocates cannot deny that we live in a world where education is still dominated by traditional teaching methods. Those who support whole language must realize that change comes slowly, and not bombard teachers who have been out in schools teaching for years. Traditional teachers still believe in the old methods because they work for them. I think it is important to allow everybody's voice to be heard, and to be tolerant of one another's beliefs. Some whole language advocates say there is not room for both a traditional approach and whole language philosophy. This kind of attitude totally silences any dialogue between whole language and traditional teachers. I advocate open lines of communications and urge teachers to continue to dialogue about the best ways of meeting the needs of the learners.

My final concern with whole language is with its lack of a systematic approach. When I am conducting workshops for teachers of adults, they are looking for activities that will work in the classroom. They want lots of handouts describing methods and activities that work to bring back to their programs, share with their colleagues, and try out in their classrooms. Whole language is a philosophy, not a program. For teachers to learn about it, they must invest a lot of time into learning its philosophy. Teachers, unfortunately, do not have this luxury. They are busy people who must be prepared to teach every time they walk into their classrooms and face their students. They want methods, and whole language is not a method. I am not

advocating that it should be a method of instruction. However, I am expressing that it lacks accessibility to many teachers because of its lack of a systematic approach. For this reason, whole language advocates ought to be patient with traditional skills-approach teachers. Learning a new way to view teaching and learning takes time, and some teachers are not prepared to make such a radical change.

CONCLUSION

Harste (1989) writes that "new whole language theory suggests that teachers ask students, 'How are you different now that you have finished reading this text than when you were when you began?'" (p. 244). I want to conclude this essay by answering that question myself. Before I began reading and writing about whole language, I had some ideas about what whole language was and what it was not. I knew that it was a philosophy, and that it was not a teaching method. I knew that it promoted using whole texts in the classroom, and did not support teaching from workbooks and textbooks. I brought these ideas to my reading about whole language. As I read, I interacted with the texts and brought my own meaning to them. I learned a lot because what I read encouraged me to reflect on my own beliefs about teaching and learning. My beliefs have not changed, but rather I have a deeper awareness that my assumptions about teaching and learning effect my teaching practice.

Finally, I have created my own knowledge about whole language. I know that whole language means many things to many people. For me, whole language is a philosophy of literacy teaching based on the notion that students learn best when they experience language as an integrated whole. I find this philosophy very inviting, and I am excited about sharing my ideas, as well as my concerns about whole language, with my colleagues. My hope is that they,

too, might feel invited to engage with the philosophy and contemplate their own assumptions about learning and teaching, so that they might be encouraged to create more meaningful classes that meet the variety of needs of ABE and ESL learners.

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